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Where is the Environmental Justice in the Lower Ninth? How Nonprofits and Residents within the Lower Ninth Ward View Environmental Justice Issues after Hurricane Katrina

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How Nonprofits and Residents within the Lower Ninth Ward View Environmental Justice Issues after Hurricane Katrina.

By

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Abstract:

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Environmental injustice has exacerbated in the Lower Ninth Ward after Hurricane Katrina. Eleven years after Katrina and the Lower Ninth community is struggling to fully recover, regardless the amount of aid it has received from different types of charitable organizations. An understanding of how residents and organizations within the Lower Ninth Ward view environmental justice issues may help explain why this community's revival is so delayed. Through the application of the snowball method, I obtained three case studies within this research that each present three dissimilar interpretations of the environmental justice issues and state of Lower Ninth. These views differ from each other and were represented as cynical, realistic, or optimistic. These perspectives addressed the community and organizations' efforts towards bringing the Lower Ninth back to its vibrant nature before Katina. This research may further answer the question—what should be done next for the Lower Ninth Ward?

The focal point of my thesis is the concept of environmental justice, and the thesis' development remarkably correlates with the evolution of the environmental justice movement.

Chapter 1:

Introduction with an Overview of Methodology

The Environmental Justice Movement arguably was developed from the historic Civil Rights Movement of the mid-1900s. The Civil Rights Movement addressed the entitled and rightful virtues of all Americans but centered around African Americans in particular. During my undergraduate junior year, I attended a public history course on the Civil Rights Movement, and the experience introduced me to a modern day environmental justice issue. That environmental justice concern was towards the delayed revival of the Lower Ninth Ward and its community after Hurricane Katrina. The slow progress of the Lower Ninth Ward's full recovery or its lack of resilience has shaped my research question: Where is the environmental justice in the Lower Ninth Ward? Therefore, I am working towards answering this through gaining an understanding of how both organizations/ nonprofits and residents within this region of New Orleans, view environmental justice issues that were pre-existing Katrina and are current. Likewise, I am working to apprehend how the Lower Ninth Ward community is still in "pieces," despite having over a decade to pick and put themselves back together since the natural disaster. It needs to be understood that there was neglect this area. Therefore, I want to address residents and charitable sources that have aided the Lower Ninth community to understand why the area is taking so long to recover and I will do this by looking at many organizations and community members that provide services to bring back this area.

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In December of 2015, I partook in a course containing a brief Civil Rights Mini-Term trip for two weeks that concentrated on this transformative social movement of the 20th century. While on the trip I also learned how the history surrounding the movement was presented to the public. This experience provided me with my first taste of the city of New Orleans. My course group collectively comprised two Union College professors and fifteen undergraduate students (including myself). We traveled through multiple Southern states to mimic segments of the historic Freedom Rides and to understand how the Civil Rights Movement was being commemorated in those parts of the United States. The last segment of the trip concluded in New Orleans, Louisiana, where we saw how the modern and infamous event of Hurricane Katrina was being remembered in the city. We attended a Hurricane Katrina museum exhibit on the tenth anniversary of the disaster. The exhibit was extremely thorough with information about the storm and its impact at *The Presbytère (*a Louisiana state museum) located in Jackson Square—the heart of the French Quarter, which triggered strange feelings of uneasiness for me. The exhibit had many recorded news reports from 2005, and documented video clips visibly showing the forces of the storm that demolished this city and numerous homes. There were different, yet tragic, recorded narratives from families about their experience with Katrina. There were even written letters from Katrina survivors, that were written during or after the storm and presented on the walls of the exhibit. Collectively, the group admired the French Quarter because it was flooded with money, music, energy, tourists, and partying (lacking any signs of trauma from Hurricane Katrina).

Consequently, seeing the French Quarter before any other part of New Orleans led me to incorrectly believe that every tragic or destroyed thing I saw in the Katrina exhibit was wiped away and restored. Ten years since Hurricane Katrina, I thought the entire city had enough time to get back on its feet. However, when I returned to New Orleans I learned there was more than the French Quarter in this city.

"What happened at the New Orleans?"

- Messy Mya (the voice of the opening of Beyoncé's Formation Music Video)

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My second time in New Orleans was during a spring vacation for my college and I brought along three friends. All together we stayed at an Airbnb in the Upper Ninth Ward. The location of our Airbnb complemented my friends' and my cheap budget and it was overall just cheaper than staying in the French Quarter. Staying in this region showed me a part of New Orleans that was in a state of dismay compared to the French Quarter. My second time in New Orleans allowed me to begin to see how I mistakenly believed the French Quarter visibly represented all of the city. Instead, the visit helped me to see how another area of New Orleans looked from the upturn that Hurricane Katrina brought.

One day during my vacation, I parted for a few hours from my friends, caught an Uber, and asked the driver to drop me off at any area in the Lower Ninth Ward. My Airbnb hostess

shared some knowledge and accounts of the Lower Ninth and this triggered a personal need to explore. Of course, this vague request caught my Uber driver's attention. My driver was a lovely fifty-year-old African American woman named Denise, who would later become a close friend of mine. Denise wanted to learn why I wanted to go to the Lower Ninth Ward because it was clear that I was not from the area by my Uber trip request. I shared with Denise that I wanted to see what the level of restoration in that area looked like. I was hoping that much was not different than the French Quarter, although I'd heard a few stories from my Airbnb hostess about the Lower Ninth being the hardest hit area by Hurricane Katrina. Therefore, Denise was thoughtful enough to give me a tour of the Lower Ninth Ward area in her car. She used to live in the area and did not charge me an Uber fee for the experience. After Hurricane Katrina, Denise moved to another area of the city because that was all she could think of doing.

We drove around the Lower Ninth and I began to see the contrast of the area to the French Quarter. A specific area of the Lower Ninth neighborhood caught my attention while driving around. As the sun began to set and the streets got darker, I noticed only a few street lights were turning on from that area. Some areas' street lights were not coming on and were even just tall broken poles. This troubled me because families were living in these poorly lit neighborhoods, instead of a rightfully deserved lit vicinity. The Lower Ninth neighborhood is not abandoned; it just appears neglected. Denise told me that this is an aspect of New Orleans that many people do not get to see or are not aware of. Denise was understanding towards my astonishment because she knew a lot of people from outside New Orleans only visit the French Quarter. As a result, they leave the city thinking that the French Quarter is representative of all of New Orleans' seventeen wards. The Ninth Ward is the largest of the seventeen wards, but it

contains poorly lit communities with demolished homes from Katrina. Some homes still have Federal Emergency Management Agency FEMA X markings that were drawn during Katrina and used to indicate the number of bodies in abandoned or flooded homes. Also, overgrown weeds which stood taller than homes in the area were scattered through the neighborhood because negligence leads to poor upkeep of the community's environment. Hence, there were more than enough poor infrastructure indicators that showed that Hurricane Katrina hit the Lower Ninth Ward hard, and Katrina's effects are still existing in the area.

When I concluded my brief drive with Denise through her former neighborhood, I suddenly noticed bright and funky designed buildings located on Franklin Avenue, near one of the infamous and rebuilt levee walls. I asked Denise about the distinctive looking homes along the avenue and she informed me that they belonged to Brad Pitt. Later, I would learn more about the *Make It Right Foundation* and how it is an organization founded by Pitt and that he has numerous restoration project homes in the Lower Ninth Ward. The homes from the foundation have an appearance very different than traditional New Orleans shotgun style homes. Their bright colors, abstract designs, and visible environmentally conscious architecture, which outlined Franklin Avenue and some surrounding streets with a cheerful but different ambiance, seemed out of place. I asked Denise if the Lower Ninth Ward residents liked the *Make It Right* homes and Denise briefly shared that most people of the community were just happy to have a place to call home or grateful to be able to come back to this area. This is what triggered my focus towards understanding the views of the Lower Ninth residents, who are devoted to bringing back their community.

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The Summer of 2016, Dr. Janet Grigsby, a sociology professor at Union College, helped me organize a week stay in the Lower Ninth Ward for my thesis. Through a social scientific method known as the snowball method of sampling, I collected interviews and documented conversations with residents and individuals involved in charitable Lower Ninth organizations. Dr. Grigsby serves as one of my two thesis advisors for my New Orleans focused research. Dr. Robert Samet, an anthropology professor at Union, is my other advisor and has allowed Dr. Grigsby to take the lead with advising this New Orleans thesis because she is familiar with the city of New Orleans and her work focuses on the sociology of disaster. Dr. Grigsby has been leading a three-week Community Service Mini-Term—an educational expedition—in New Orleans for almost a decade.

When staying in the community, a central goal of mine was to get to know the Lower Ninth Ward area, its residents, and those involved in charitable work for the area. During my stay in the Lower Ninth, I wanted to learn the diverse outlooks of some community members towards the current state of the area after Hurricane Katrina. I wanted to become familiar with how this community interprets charitable organizations based in the Lower Ninth. Applying the snowball method involved using a few personal contacts that professor Grigsby and I had prior to coming. The snowball method gets its name because it is similar to the formation of a snowball rolling and enlarging as it collects snow. The snow represents the unpredictable information collected with this social scientific method. Informants known prior to going into the field can point the way towards others to talk to who are helpful to my thesis and can help

answer my questions. I had formulated two lists of questions prior to the trip that I asked separately to Lower Ninth residents and to individuals involved in the Lower Ninth nonprofits (See Appendix). Every question I formulated was not asked because some answers to my questions sometimes were casually addressed and answered in conversation. However, all my questions worked towards answering: Where is the environmental justice in the Lower Ninth Ward? The snowball method helped answered how organizations and residents within the Lower Ninth Ward interpret environmental justice issues after Hurricane Katrina and provided unpredictable responses that ended up being extremely helpful to my critical questions. I was able to document some great conversations with residents and organizations.

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When Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005, New Orleans and other areas inside and outside the United States endured some major damages and losses. In particular, the city of New Orleans' levees and surrounding wetlands are visible examples of both man-made structures and natural buffers failing to protect this first-world city. Arguably, those failures towards protecting the city occurred because of human faults and/or poor decision making. Despite it being about eleven years since Katrina and these failures, the Lower Ninth Ward is struggling to return back to being a culturally vibrant community. All the blame cannot be put on these human faults that caused the paralyzed state of the Lower Ninth Ward. What surprisingly might have contributed to the unacceptable delay of the reestablishment of the Lower Ninth is a controversial and continuous "second flooding" of outsiders who poured into the area to help restore the destruction by Katrina. There was a lot of news coverage on Katrina's destruction and impact on

individuals, and this led to an influx of volunteers and organizations wanting to help the Lower Ninth and repair it.

Both the types of organizations and the numerous individuals wanting to get involved in the restoration process can be problematic. To briefly explain, a controversial concept is known as the "Compassion Industry" surrounds this notion. It recognizes that some charitable aid is self-motivated and not truly in the best interest of those that are being helped. Therefore, when looking at the Lower Ninth community I will not only examine what the community is doing to get to a sustainable position. I will also separately look at the outsiders (non-native volunteers) that have come to the area, and what they are really contributing and offering.

I gathered some interesting and diverse views about the restoration occurring in the Lower Ninth from my case studies, interviews with Nat Turner, Arthur Johnson, and Robert Green. First, I conversed with 43-year old, Nat Turner, the executive director of *Our School at Blair Grocery* (OSBG), who today lives in the Lower Ninth across from the OSBG property. He provided insight about his organization and life in the Lower Ninth Ward. I spoke with Turner on his front porch and over the sounds of goats on the OSBG farm. Second, I was able to have the opportunity to speak with Arthur Johnson, the chief executive officer of the *Lower Ninth Ward Center for Sustainable Engagement and Development* (CSED). Johnson provided me with a brief understanding of some current environmental justice issues, and how much the Lower Ninth community is understanding what is going on and is at risk. However, my most extensive and memorable interview was about four and a half hours long with 54-year old, Robert Green. Mr. Green has lived in the Lower Ninth Ward for forty-two years. He is involved in several

organizations that are working to bring back the community to how it was before Katrina. Mr. Green was a remarkable individual to speak with because he witnessed the hurricane, and is working to recover from its damages till this day.

The Turner, Johnson, and Green interviews each present diverse and significant perspectives for my thesis. Many organizations and residents within the Lower Ninth Ward have interesting views towards the environmental injustice after Hurricane Katrina. This helps pinpoint where the environmental injustices in the Lower Ninth Ward subsist. Each gentleman I conversed with agrees that they were grateful for outside aid. However, they are conscious of the cultural changes and environmental injustices that are not being addressed by many charitable organizations in this area. Each case study provided distinct standpoints towards the Lower Ninth Ward's return. Essentially, what was gained from these case studies was that environmental injustice plays a huge role in this community and is in need of being acknowledged. My goal is to both recognize and comprehend where exactly the environmental injustice is in the Lower Ninth. After over decade since Katrina, the reason why I care about this is because the Lower Ninth seems paralyzed and the recovery they are entitled to be overdue. Environmental injustice is to blame for the Lower Ninth delayed comeback.

Chapter 2:

Environmental Justice (Literature Review)

The Concepts and Its History

Conceptually, environmental justice can help provide a significant understanding of how social inequalities have disproportionately influenced the recovery for areas within New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Social disparities have been rooted throughout American history, and today, resonate in the lives of Americans. Historically, some injustices were challenged by the Civil Rights Movement, commencing with the *1954 Brown v. Board of Education* trial and decision. During the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement, there were numerous protests and acts against the American system since it discriminated against minority groups and low-class Americans. The conclusion of this movement is still indefinite because there are current injustices challenging many Americans.

A leading figure of the Civil Rights Movement was Martin Luther King Jr., an African-American minister and activist, who beautifully stated:

> *The black revolution is much more than a struggle for the rights of Negroes. It is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws—racism, poverty, militarism, and materialism. It is exposing evils that are rooted deeply in the whole structure of our society … and suggests that radical reconstruction of society is the real issue to be faced* (Hall, 2005: 1233).

Dr. King's statement is significant because it addresses injustices during his time that are still applicable today. Dr. King suggested there be a "radical reconstruction of society," but advocated for this reconstruction because of "interrelated flaws—racism, poverty, militarism, and materialism…" that were not being acknowledged and confronted, and were "rooted deeply in the whole structure of our society" (Hall, 2005).

The Civil Rights Movement push for the *Civil Rights Act of 1964,* which required nondiscriminatory behavior from all federal programs. In addition, the *Voting Rights Act of 1965*--another outcome of the Civil Rights Movement--allowed African-Americans to exercise their right to vote (Hall, 2005). These two Acts were just a few ways the movement helped push America closer to systematic equality and were the first steps towards the reconstruction of American society. The *Civil Rights Act of 1964* required all federal environmental programs to uphold unprejudiced behavior when distributing protection to Americans from environmental harms or hazards. The implementation of any policy or Act is only as strong as those that make up the nation; therefore, it is up to Americans to obey and understand the enforcements working to ensure justice for all.

The Environmental Justice Movement is just an extension of the Civil Rights Movement since it advocates for civil rights within environmental laws and policies (Robert, 1994). Race relations, overall, invoked the Civil Rights Movement, because racism is when one race is identified as inferior and another as superior, making equality impossible. Many Americans have experienced different forms of racism and have pushed for social justice. The connection between historic examples of racism within America and environmental racism is significant, because environmental racism, ultimately, branched from historic racism and is just a form of racism that obscures environmental justice for all. What is more, the concept of environmental racism source from environmental justice, because justice is desired by those who often feel marginalized.

Environmental disparities recognize and divide one group as superior and the other as inferior, which ignites the need for justice by those oppressed. Elliot and Pais (2006) found that a lot of research and observations support that low-income minority communities are disproportionately distributed among different environmental hazards. They are inequitably highly exposed to environmental risks because the American social system institutionally works to define individuals in a racist and classist ways (Ford and Gee 2011). It does not take a scholar to recognize or formulate an answer as to why the government and many industries fail to protect by constantly locating environmental hazards near low-income and/ or minority communities. These communities are very susceptible to environmental risk because of their lack of social, political, and economic power to stop such treatment: they lack a voice and means to stop such ill and inequitable actions.

Frequently, underprivileged and minority concentrated communities that endure these injustices are asked: Why don't you leave the risky conditions and dangers near you? Environmental and health hazards cannot be easily and/or cheaply escaped in these communities. For example, the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans, Louisiana consists of cheap home properties that are affordable and provide an opportunity for homeownership for low-income and marginalized communities (Elliot and Pais, 2006). Therefore, many people living in the Lower Ninth Ward are there primarily because they were able to afford it. After Hurricane Katrina, many in the community could not afford to repair their home or buy a new one.

Minority groups are more at risk of environmental and health hazards, because of systematic oppression than those who are privileged and of the White majority. This resulted

from a long, messy, and racially conflicted history, in which African-Americans were viewed as a second-rate group and were not entitled to the same rights and laws that America was built on. African-American slaves, for example, were considered three-fifths of a person at one point in history. Systematic oppression was very visible in American history. Today, it occurs still in forms that all Americans are not aware or knowledgeable of. African-American needs are being ignored and are not seen as a priority by the government (which systematically keeps this racial group from advancing). The *Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment* is traditionally looked at as the initial answer against racial discrimination in America, but it is not always enforced (Robert, 1994).

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There are many historic examples of environmental injustices being encountered in different communities across the United States. A historic example of an environmental injustice occurred in the city of Kettleman, which is a tiny farm community located in California. This community had high concentrations of poverty and about 95 percent of the residents were Latino. In 1975, Kettleman City was not only located only three miles from the largest West Coast toxic waste dump owned by Chemical Waste Management, Inc. but was created without residents' knowledge or consent (Cole, 2001).

A current environmental law in California requires public notice to be given by a company when they make decisions that will affect the community. However, this was not done for the city of Kettleman. In 1988, Chemical Waste Management tried to propose adding an

incinerator that would burn about 108,000 more tons of toxic waste into waste sites near this community (Cole, 2001), thus, bestowing injustices upon them as the community of Kettleman City became more vulnerable to environmental and health hazards. Chemical Waste Management, Inc.'s proposals were never directly shared with the community, but once the community discovered the company's environmentally detrimental and unhealthy plans, they took action. The community of Kettleman City started to acknowledge the injustice and demanded the justice they were entitled to as Americans. The discriminatory placement of environment hazards caused the people of Kettleman to commence a grassroots movement (a local level movement). As a result, the city became a historic account of a disadvantaged community confronting unfair environmental risks bestowed by those with power and wealth. Bowen and Wells (2002) expressed that the late 1970s and 1980's had many grassroots movements that occurred across the United States, and helped popularize the concept, *environmental racism.*

Since environmental racism was experienced by many communities, environmental justice was sought by those who are underprivileged and taken advantage of in systematic ways that deprived their communities of protection from environmental and health risks. Other brief historical accounts of environmental injustice experienced by communities include the Love Canal community of Niagara Falls, New York, and the southern California town called Hinkley. Love Canal, in the late 1970s, was a pollution disaster that impacted the health of many residents because of Hooker Chemical Company's poor waste disposal. In 1990's, the well-known environmental activist and legal clerk, Erin Brockovich helped the town of Hinkley confront Pacific Gas and Electric Company about their contaminated water (O'Brien, 2013). In addition,

the company Chemical Waste Management--which is the largest toxic waste dumping company in the United States-- exemplified environmental racism. In the late 1970s, the company was guilty of dumping millions of tons of hazardous waste on former farmlands within Emelle, Alabama, and as a result, the area became the largest hazardous waste landfill in the United States (Cole, 2001). The town of Emelle was populated with about 95 percent African-Americans and received waste from numerous Superfund sites from 48 different U.S. states; hence the concern about environmental and health conditions amongst low-income, minority communities (Cole, 2001).

Therefore, the Environmental Justice Movement created opportunities for "marginalized communities" to have a voice against environmental and health hazards (Cole, 2001:10). A community has the right to voice their opinions against negative social implication and public health concerns because Americans are allowed to fight against injustices being bestowed on segments of society. Communities just want to be provided with the chances to contribute to the decision-making process regarding their *own* future.

Sociologist and the father of environmental justice, Dr. Robert Bullard, supports the intertwine of environmental and social justice because he believes the Environmental Justice Movement has redefined what is environmentalism and who is an environmentalist. As the author of approximately eighteen books regarding numerous topics such as environmental racism, sustainable development, and emergency response, Bullard believes that people today are beginning to understand that environmental problems are really social problems (Schweizer, 1999). *Environmental justice* emerged as a distinct concept in the United States in the 1980s. The

concept is defined by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as the fair treatment and involvement of all towards the developing, implementing, and enforcing of environmental laws, regulations, and policies (EPA, 3/2/2016). The EPA was formed to regulate human-caused impacts on the environment and to ultimately help establish a healthier ecosystem for Americans. This federal agency works to achieve environmental justice for all communities within the nation and provide them with equal levels of protection from environmental and health concerns. For example, the EPA has regulated and fined the disposal and storage of waste by Chemical Waste Management, Inc. (in regards to Kettleman and Emelle communities); and, for the community of Love Canal, the EPA enforced Acts (i.e. Clean Water Act, Toxic Substance Act, Safe Drinking Water Act) to protect the health of the people and condition of the environment within this community.

First, the EPA established an Office of Environmental Justice in 1992 to help coordinate environmental justice concerns in the United States, and to monitor the equal protection of communities, especially, those that are underprivileged (Bowen and Wells, 2002). Second, the National Environmental Justice Council was established by the EPA in 1994, and it instructs actions on all federal matters connected to environmental justice (Bowen and Wells, 2002). Finally, an environmental justice executive order was signed on February 11, 1994, by President Bill Clinton. Executive Order 12898 "Federal Action to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations" stimulated more attention towards environmental justice from the government (Bowen, and Wells, 2002:689). This Executive Order pushed federal agencies, departments, and programs to develop tactics to properly manage environmental justice, by working to comprehend why there were adverse health impacts on

minority and the low-income communities. Clinton's executive order also attempted to confront various forms of environmental injustice within federal laws, programs, and regulations. It is supported by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 because the executive order is meant to ensure equality for Americans (Bullard and Wright, 2012).

Research and advocacy have led environmental justice issues to be recognized at a federal level; however, the federal government's involvement does not always ensure solutions to the injustices that many Americans encounter. Environmental laws can equally "contribute and mitigate the injustice experienced by many communities" (Cole, 2002:11). Thus, in history, there have been many steps taken to diminish social and environmental injustices for segments of the American population, but underprivileged communities must continue fighting some environmental and societal issues to legitimize policies that can stop and prevent environmental injustice.

The Lower Ninth Ward

Environmental justice is a significant concept in order to understand how social disparities have affected the recovery rate of parts of New Orleans, Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina. Currently, environmental injustice subsists within New Orleans, because Katrina exacerbated pre-existing injustices and concerns pertaining to the quality of protection from future hazards. An area of New Orleans that was subjected to disproportionate aid was the Lower Ninth Ward, which was an underprivileged predominantly African-American community. Not

much is known about the Lower Ninth Ward prior to Katrina because the hurricane was the storm that brought national and international attention to the area.

Hurricane Katrina struck the city of New Orleans on August 29th of 2005. With the wind speeds up to 145 miles/hour and wind gusts of up to 175 mph, Katrina destroyed 90,000 square miles of housing throughout Southern Louisiana, Mississippi, and parts of Alabama (Dunbar, 2013). After the storm, the US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) reported that about 1.36 million people were in need of federal assistance (FEMA, 9/22/2016). However, not everyone was able to get help, because social disparities disturbed the aid and recovery for communities in the city.

Dr. Robert Bullard and Dr. Beverly Wright (2012) said the South gave birth to both the Civil Rights Movement and Environmental Justice Movement. The southern region of the United States is known for its tense race relations and its high concentration of African-Americans communities. The South was one of the least liberal areas of the United State. In addition, within history, there have been numerous weather crisis and environmental hazards (i.e. Hurricane Betsy, Hurricane Andrew, and Hurricane Rita) that have occurred in the South, which has put many communities at risk. Therefore, Bullard and Wright have a strong argument about the birthplace of these two movements. New Orleans is especially susceptible to storm surges because it is below sea-level and the coastal wetlands that act as a natural buffer against storm water surges are depleting. Geographically, New Orleans is similar to bowl, because it is placed between the Mississippi River, Lake Pontchartrain, and off the Gulf of Mexico; thus, it is hard for water to escape once it enters the city. (Bullard, 2012).

Dr. Bullard and Dr. Wright (2012) addressed the reality that many communities are not made equally and these disparities are seen between minority or underprivileged communities and majority-white or affluent communities. Unequal levels of protection and responses explain why the French Quarter is a popularized area that looks like Katrina never struck it. However, in comparison, the Lower Ninth Ward exhibits demolished homes and lots filled with overgrown weeds scattered around. Thus, this community is worst off than the French Quarter because of social and economic injustice.

The blame for Katrina's impact on the Lower Ninth Ward could be pointed in many directions. Depending on who you decide to speak to, you will hear a personal opinion for why Katrina happened as badly as it did. This chapter briefly addresses the roles that Katrina, the levees, the wetlands, and the Lower Ninth Ward all played in the delayed recovery of the area.

Chapter 3:

Where to Point the Finger?
Hurricane Katrina, the Levees, the Wetlands, or the Lower Ninth Ward?

A provocative claim I came across while in the Lower Ninth was that "White New Orleans" has recovered from Hurricane Katrina, while "Black New Orleans" is still trying to recuperate. This statement holds some truth since about 96,000 fewer African-Americans are residing in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina (Rivlin, 2016). This means that about one-third of black residents did not or could not come back to their homes (Rivlin, 2016). To validate this, a Washington Post article by Abby Philip (2015) alluded to this provocative claim and addressed that despite a decade since Katrina, there are more White residents saying that they are better off after the storm. A survey, conducted by the Louisiana State University, indicated that about 80 percent of respondents who were white residents had fully recovered after the storm (Philip 2015). About four out of five white residents said the state [Louisiana] had mostly recovered from the 2005 storms; while three in five African American residents said it mostly has not (Dreilinger, 2015). The survey also indicated "White residents are more than twice as likely as African Americans to say their own quality of life is better than before the storm. African American residents are more than three time as likely as whites to say it is worse" (Dreilinger, 2015). Since Black residents difficult time returning to the city, only about 42 percent could

come home within a year compared to 70 percent of long-term white residents (Dreilinger, 2015). Before Hurricane Katrina, 64 percent of the city was black, after Katrina 56 percent is white. Because about one-quarter of the current citizens of New Orleans after 2005 are younger, whiter and more affluent (Dreilinger, 2015).

The destruction caused by Katrina was inconsistent and made it difficult for areas like the Lower Ninth, with high concentrations of African-Americans and poverty, to recover. The Lower Ninth was struck severely as a result of its geographic vulnerability. Katina's bowl-like geography makes areas of the city more susceptible to floods and surges, and the individuals that live in those high-risk areas are individuals not fully cared about. In American history, those not recognized were subjected to the worst conditions. There need to be people on the bottom of a hierarchy, to have people on top; and American society is structured to have the rich and prestigious living above the poor and disadvantaged. An example is to think of a kingdom, where a king, queen, and other high ranked individuals would live on top of a hill and look down on the lower-class and marginalized individuals at the bottom of the hill. Those living downhill are more vulnerable to incoming danger than those on the top. Living near the levees is like living downhill of a kingdom – there is high risk.

A hurricane is ranked by its severity and can range from a *Category One* to up to a *Category Five*. These categories identify the least to the most dangerous forms of a hurricane through scientific criteria based primarily on wind speeds. Hurricane Katrina was identified as the most dangerous ranking, a Category Five, and struck some vulnerable areas within New Orleans hard (Benton, 2010). The significance of Katrina was that it was simultaneously

expected and unexpected. Katrina was expected because it was scientifically predicted, then reported, and observed to grow from a Category One to Category Five hurricane. However, the city saw this danger coming, did not know what to do, and did not act until the last minute. Thus, Katrina surprised New Orleans because the city was not prepared; and a piece of evidence is the failure of the city's levees.

New Orleans' bowl-like physiographic landscape can have storm surge pour into the city if the levees do not prevent this. In 2005, a few levees had sections that could not suppress the surge from Katrina. As a result, New Orleans experienced breaches that allowed immense amounts of water into the city and caused extreme flooding. Hurricane Katrina breached levees at the Industrial Canal, 17th Street Canal, and the London Avenue Canal. The Industrial Canal had three areas that were breached, 17th Street Canal had one, and the London Avenue Canal had two breaches (American Society of Civil Engineers Hurricane Katrina External Review Panel, 2007). The floodwalls were improperly designed and maintained by engineers, with little advice or assistance from geologists. A geologist's knowledge about the hydrodynamics of subsurface soil structures could have contributed critical information towards the developing durable levees. The Army Corps of Engineers fabricated the levees' designs and initially focused ways to simplify the shipment of goods on the canal, rather than protection against flooding. Many New Orleans residents were told and believed that the levees were enough protection from storm surge; however, the Army Corps of Engineers were incorrect because the levees were suited to protect against small storm surges and not prepared for the magnitude of Katrina (American Society of Civil Engineers Hurricane Katrina External Review Panel, 2007). Thus, the inadequate designs made the Lower Ninth community flood.

The wetlands were a natural buffer against water surge for New Orleans. They provide a natural service of draining water surge; however, the increasing loss of wetland meant lost protection for New Orleans against the storm surge that was stirred up from the hurricane. The pipeline construction to extract oil and gas from the natural systems of Louisiana triggered a lot of marsh erosion and subsurface loss, which contributed to the overall loss of the wetlands (American Society of Civil Engineers Hurricane Katrina External Review Panel, 2007). The surge from a hurricane can reach up to 20 feet, but every four miles of wetlands can absorb about a foot of that water (American Society of Civil Engineers Hurricane Katrina External Review Panel, 2007). Human tinkering has led to the "levying rivers, draining wetlands, dredging channels and cutting canals through marshes" (American Society of Civil Engineers Hurricane Katrina External Review Panel, 2007). Overall, this is rapidly diminishing wetlands which provide needed and irreplaceable natural services.

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Today, there are many conspiracies surrounding the levees that were breached. It does not seem like an accident that the few locations where the levees were breached were also near disadvantaged communities, resulting in those communities to be flooded and damaged the most. The breaches within the Industrial Canal allowed the Lower Ninth area to be flooded. It is both far-fetched and incredible to think that Mother Nature decided to harshly flood a less wealthy and predominantly black area of New Orleans over affluent parts; but it is interesting how there

were overall fewer damages in rich areas like the Business District, French Quarter, and the Garden District after Katrina.

Ted Steinberg, the author of *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disasters in America*, like Dr. Bullard, believes humans prefer pointing fingers at God and Mother Nature and assigning them as fully responsible for a natural disaster like Katrina. This occurs because it provides individuals with an explanation for why things are happening to them. As well, it hides the reality of systematic flaws that induced the disproportionate damages throughout New Orleans. This perspective mitigated attention towards the honest fact that some Americans are just better protected from environmental hazard than others (Bullard and Wright, 2012). Conspiracies surrounding the causes for the disproportionate damages and flooding also hyped up beliefs of social and environmental injustice towards communities like the Lower Ninth Ward.

Arguably, when Katrina hit New Orleans the media provided visible proof of the type of individuals experiencing the most trauma. Many of those individuals were African-Americans and/ or people of low socio-economic backgrounds. Today, the Lower Ninth has visible evidence up and down its streets that indicate that Katrina hit the area hard. For example, there are homes still gutted and boarded up in the neighborhood, and many lots filled with overgrown grass and weeds because they were neglected by former residents. One of the most traumatic things to see in the Lower Ninth today are the FEMA X markings still on former homes, which eleven years ago horribly indicated the dead body counts found within houses during and after the storm.

The Lower Ninth Ward is visibly still struggling to recover and there are fewer original Lower Ninth community members after Katrina. Community members who were able to return to the area explained that the Lower Ninth Ward will forever be their home, regardless its current state. However, the number of residents in the area was much less that before Katrina because, to reiterate, a lot of people did not and could not come back to the Lower Ninth Ward and even New Orleans after Katrina. Thus, a small new wave of residents came to the Lower Ninth after Katrina because they saw the cheap housing and abundance of space in the area as an opportunity to reestablish. With new residents came new ways, traditions, cultures, and the issues of gentrification, especially, for some returning residents of the community. Many original members were upset that many significant attributes of the Lower Ninth had been washed away, but much of the Lower Ninth community seemed to have moved on and (internally or emotionally) accepted Katrina and the damage it aroused.

Katrina was just a "messed up storm" and is referred to as a time marker by many residents with statements like "before the storm" and "after the storm" in conversation. A few individuals I encountered, spoke of Hurricane Katrina in numb and accepting ways. During my multiple visits to the Lower Ninth Ward, I met many individuals that recognized that there was no way to go back in time and undo everything. All their community can do is move on, but despite the Lower Ninth wanting to move on, the area seems trapped in a state that reflects the toll Katrina had on the community. Many members of the area are tolerating and carrying their pains within them, which resonated from the surreal sway Katrina had on their lives. Katrina was traumatizing. Not everything experienced and endured was shown by the media (because of how

gruesome and traumatic it was for viewers), but it stays with many of these residents for the rest of their lives.

Therefore, while I was in the Lower Ninth I felt as if there was a fictional wall blocking the progression and the forward motion of this community. This imaginary wall was erected by fear, trauma, and embodied the government, systematic oppression, and poor finances (all aspects standing in the way of this community's recovery). Environmental injustice is present in the Lower Ninth Ward today because the community was poorly protected from Hurricane Katrina and given insignificant support to recover compared to other areas of New Orleans.

Chapter 4:

Free Aid? The Organizations Helping the Lower Ninth Ward

The Lower Ninth Ward is confronted with environmental injustices; however, the community receives assistance from different organizations. There is an assortment of organizations dedicated to serving the Lower Ninth Ward that is categorized as (local) grassroots, national, non-profit, faith-based, or even celebrity-run organizations. Grassroots are typically local organizations very connected to the community. A defining characteristic of these types of organizations is that most of their labors and efforts are done by community members and local people. While nonprofits have a purpose or mission to help a social cause, they are not trying to make profits (*What Do We Mean When We Say "Nonprofit*," 2013). National organizations differ because they actively work to fulfill a nationwide goal and can have different chapters across the United States. Some faith-based organizations have chapters too and are led by churches or affiliated with religious groups, but still, have an overall direct commitment towards specific causes. Lastly, celebrity-run organizations are typically propelled by a well-known public figure to draw the public's attention towards the organization's purpose. Despite the attributes of each categorized organization, each type of organization is found in the Lower Ninth Ward and assists the community in different ways. The *Make It Right Foundation, Common Ground Relief, Habitat for Humanity, St. Bernard,* and *Project Homecoming* are all charitable organizations that I encountered during my research and are categorized as one or more of the assortment of organizations dedicated to serving the Lower Ninth Ward community.

Make It Right Foundation

Every organization has its own methodology and mission statement that address their aspirations. I learned about the *Make It Right Foundation* my second time in New Orleans. It

occurred when I was with my Uber driver and (new) friend, Denise. The *Make It Right Foundation* was founded by the celebrity, Brad Pitt in 2007 and works to build homes in the Lower Ninth community along with projects in New Jersey and Missouri. This national and celebrity-run organization's projects are based in the Lower Ninth Ward, and have LEED Platinum certified homes inspired by the book *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* by architect William McDonough and chemist Dr. Michael Braungart (*Make It Right Foundation*, *web.* 2017). The book speaks of environment-friendly and smart designs that are not too harmful to the environment, and the *Make It Right Foundation* applies those tips into their Lower Ninth projects. Hence, their home projects are designed to produce more energy than consumed, use water stewardship strategies, and overall have a positive impact on the surrounding environment (*Make It Right Foundation*, *web.* 2017). The foundation believes that everyone has the right to live in a high-quality home that can be enriching to the natural environment. The foundation works to produce vibrant, sustainable, and affordable communities, especially working to enhance the Lower Ninth occupants' living conditions (*Make It Right Foundation*, *web.* 2017).

I had a hard time finding someone to interview or talk to about the foundation's relationship with the Lower Ninth community since the founder was a celebrity. *Make It Right* was very strict about having appointments and wanted to keep their business in a good light. The idea of an undergraduate student researching their organization's purpose and intentions for the Lower Ninth was not appealing enough for someone in the foundation's headquarters to make time to speak with me. As a college student with lots of questions, they were not eager to provide much information apart from what was on the *Make It Right Foundation*'s website. Therefore, I was left with only the opinions of the Lower Ninth community towards the foundation. Most

individuals I spoke to about *Make It Right* shared opinions of the outrageous appearances of some their home projects compared to the rest of the neighborhood. Their home projects were characterized by funky designs, crazy shapes, and bright colors which looked very modern, and not anything like the traditional New Orleans shot-gun-styled homes. Basically, Brad Pitt came to the Lower Ninth and built numerous homes after Katrina, and today he is no longer a part of the organization while the foundation has moved projects to other locations. Therefore, those I spoke to said that all they know is that this foundation came, just did some projects, and left, which helped only a small portion of the community.

Common Ground Relief

My third trip to New Orleans was in May of 2016, and I discovered a grassroots and nonprofit called *Common Ground Relief.* The organization was located in the Lower Ninth community and focused also on wetland upturn. I met Thom Pepper, the operations and executive director of *Common Ground Relief*, and he shared a significant perspective towards the delayed restoration of the infrastructure of the Lower Ninth. Pepper had some interesting opinions of other organizations trying to help the Lower Ninth. He shared with me his honest views of some of the efforts that other organizations working to “fix” what Katrina destroyed in the community.

Common Ground Relief is an organization with a focus on "learning service" rather than, "service learning." They do not want their volunteers to just jump into services but take the time to be educated first before working to make a difference. Volunteers of this organization learn

about the social and environmental issues and work to gain a comprehensive understanding of the community and critical environmental information. *Common Ground Relief* works to develop and train volunteers to have a well-rounded conception of what is going on around them through active experiences. The organization seeks to have a positive impact through providing solidarity and support to coastal communities of the state of Louisiana.

Pepper openly admitted that he was not fond of some organizations trying to help the Lower Ninth; such as the *St. Bernard Project or Project Homecoming*, which is comprised of many AmeriCorps[1] members. He was especially not fond of the *Make It Right Foundation,* and *Habitat for Humanity,* which are national organizations, because he was concerned about the intentions of these charitable organizations. Pepper honestly wants the best for the community, and he was apprehensive about many charitable organizations that are recruiting a lot of middle-class students from all over the United States and paying them to stay and serve without really training or educating them about the community they are helping.

My conversation with Pepper directed me towards the concept, *Compassion Industry*. Pepper believed many residents in New Orleans are willing to work to rebuild the city because it is their home. There are some community members he believed would perform these services and would benefit more, compared to AmeriCorps workers who were compensated with a stipend. I enjoyed conversing with Thom Pepper, and it was nothing like an interview when I met up with him. It felt more like a vent session for feelings he had been bottling up inside, and

[1] A federal program engaging young adults to commit to full-time or part-time service work (10). Thom did not like that many individuals involved are outsiders of communities, and lack adequate training and education before their service. They are also provided a stipend for the duration of their service work.

my questions about these organizations helping the area and injustices in the Lower Ninth brought out his frustration. I was happy to have the opportunity to hear Pepper's honest thoughts. He had valid points about the influence that charitable organizations have on the Lower Ninth. His concerns about organizations not having a genuine interested in helping the area and the local people were honest thoughts that challenged outsiders for being self-motivated or self-interested.

Pepper shared his displeasure with organizations that are quick to take pictures of a completed project and eagerly post about it online to show what they have accomplished, instead of adequately checking the quality of the project. However, since a lot of homes are made by untrained volunteers, the quality is not always up to its best standards. Pepper told me some stories of homes that fell apart quickly after they were built. An example was that a few of the *Make It Right* homes in the Lower Ninth had experienced water damage a few years after they were built, which was concerning because these houses are in a flood prone zone and are vulnerable to surges.

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Habitat for Humanity

After Hurricane Katrina, the Lower Ninth Ward experienced a rush of well-known national organizations into the area that wanted to offer assistance, like *Habitat for Humanity* and the *St. Bernard Project*. *Habitat for Humanity* is a religious-based organization that brought people together to build homes for those in need and has a world vision that everyone deserves a decent home (*Habitat for Humanity,* web. *2017)*. As a religious-based organization, their mission is to demonstrate their love of Jesus Christ through their providing shelter, advocating affordable

housing, promoting dignity and hope, and supporting sustainable and transformational development (*Habitat for Humanity,* web. *2017)*. *Habitat for Humanity* is also internationally recognized and active in many areas of the world. They have gathered volunteers from different places to help build homes for families and spread their mission.

During the two-week Civil Rights Mini-term I attended in December of 2015, my groups spent a day volunteering for *Habitat for Humanity* when we were in New Orleans. Before attending the mini-term, the whole group had to sign waivers to be able to work for *Habitat for Humanity*; however, we did not know what we were going to be doing when we arrived at the site. The morning we arrived at the site, we learned that we were just building window frames and painting the interior of a newly built home for the day. A New Orleanian family was waiting for its completion and visited us as we were midway through the day of service.

My brief service experience showed me how an organization could easily let a bunch of untrained college students work on a home project of which a family was patiently waiting. Being able to see the family (whose home we were preparing) during my day of service with *Habitat for Humanity,* caused me to recognize how critical these efforts were for some families in New Orleans. Collectively, our mini-term group had almost zero experience with restoring homes, so I personally felt a need to do a good job because people would be living in the house one day. This experience with *Habitat for Humanity* provided an opportunity to see the internal configuration of an organization in New Orleans and the type of people involved in it. The members of *Habitat for Humanity* who were in charge of us for the day were not much older than me and were recruited through the AmeriCorps. Thus, this brief involvement gave me a taste what it was like to be a volunteer who was inexperienced and unfamiliar with the area but

asked to help. I can admit that I lacked knowledge of the city of New Orleans and Katrina when I worked on this charitable project.

St. Bernard Project

The *St. Bernard Projec*t's has an interesting mission to reduce the span of time between a disaster and full recovery by ensuring that disaster-impacted citizens and communities can recover in a prompt, efficient, and predictable manner (*St. Bernard Project*, web. 2017). I was introduced to my thesis advisor Robert Samet's cousin Harris, who was a Tulane University graduate involved with the *St. Bernard Project.* Harris was building the foundation of a home located in the Lower Ninth Ward in May of 2016 when I visited New Orleans for the third time. I was able to visit Harris at the site he worked, and I met his fellow St. Bernard Project co-worker named Strong.

Strong, was a nickname but it fit him because of the intensive labor he was able to do on the site. He was an African-American man from the Lower Ninth area, and lived through the storm but did not have much to tell me about his experience during Katrina. The only thing Strong shared with me about Hurricane Katrina was that it was a "messed up time," which was an obvious and honest response. Strong seemed concerned about the focus of my thesis. He posed the question to me, "Why do you care about this?" and had a skeptical attitude towards my thesis, which was about his home, community, and life. He wanted me to know that this is not something I can just study like a lab experiment because this was about a community. He did not want my research to present the Lower Ninth Ward as an object of study because it was his home. Strong can be identified as an insider questioning an outsider's purpose and intentions.

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Harris explained to me why he was a part of the *St. Bernard Project.* By acknowledging that it takes him and the other volunteers weeks to finish a house, he knows his organization's efforts are gradual and not immense. However, he compared his service to a story about a boy and starfish.

A man was walking on the beach one day and saw a boy picking up starfish that had washed up onto the shore. One-by-one, the boy threw starfish back into the ocean. The man approached the young boy and asked why he was doing this, there were way too many starfish on the shore to help them all. The boy picked up a starfish and replied to the man that he could at least help this one, and threw the starfish in his hand into the ocean. Then he picked up another and said to the man that he could at least help this one, and again threw a starfish.

Therefore, Harris shared this story with me because, in the grand scheme of things, he knew his service was not doing a lot but it was doing something. He was a part of the organization because his small efforts could benefit someone in need.

Project Homecoming

Project Homecoming is a faith-based and community developing nonprofit that works to build resilient neighborhoods. Unlike *Habitat for Humanity*, *Project Homecomin*g was established within New Orleans and is directing its attention towards reviving the city. The organization is committed to "facilitating a culture of care in targeted communities," and supports "safe, durable, affordable and environmentally sensitive construction" (Project Homecoming, web, 2017). Their focus on New Orleans is important because cultural

understandings are needed before trying to restore an area, so the community can respond positively to the efforts. It is critical to know the people you are helping.

I met Daniel my second time in New Orleans, immediately after leaving my Uber ride with Denise. He was a recent college graduate from Texas who was involved with *Project Homecomin*g through AmeriCorps. The Lower Ninth's lack of restoration was very apparent to Daniel and he spoke about the area's slow return. All he and his organization could do for the time for the Lower Ninth was just keep trying to finding different houses to fix. However, Daniel said something that will forever resonate within me. He told me that it is inevitable that another storm will strike the city again (Daniel, March 21, 2016). Areas like the Lower Ninth Ward are still far from being fully restored despite having over a decade to return. For the Lower Ninth to be hit again with a storm in its current state would be terrible. This community is even more vulnerable than it was before Katrina.

Therefore, the assortment of organizations that are dedicated to serving the Lower Ninth Ward are comprised of different kinds of individuals and have different attributes. Regardless, the similarity between all of these organizations is their involvement with the Lower Ninth Ward. The Lower Ninth is a community confronted with environmental injustices. The aid and support these organizations provide helps the community get closer to getting back on their feet and able to mobilize on environmental justice issues. Many organizations seem to lack a cultural understanding of what is going on in the Lower Ninth Ward because they are comprised of volunteers and outsiders. Thus, it is up to the residents to educate and work for justice.

Chapter 5:

The *Compassion Industry*

Working to understand how nonprofits and residents within the Lower Ninth Ward view environmental justice issues after Hurricane Katrina requires consideration of a concept known as the "compassion industry." Robert D. Lupton brought forth the concept of the "compassion industry" in his book, *Toxic Charity* (2011). Lupton introduces his own description of the concept as the involvement of Americans in charitable programs or organizations being a waste, or simultaneously causing individuals to be in direct harm. *Toxic Charity* argues that the charitable efforts of organizations are similar to the analogy of *giving a hungry man a fish every day, rather than teaching him how to fish on his own.* Programs and organizations with charitable purposes (or missions) can cause some communities to become dependent on the aid, instead of getting those communities to stand on their own.

My interpretation of the *compassion industry* begins with analyzing the two words it encompasses. First*, compassion* is defined as sympathetic pity and/or the concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others (*Webster Dictionary*). Second, an *industry* is defined as a group of businesses that provide a particular product or service. The word *industry* within the *compassion industry* correlates to when individuals provide volunteer services and get to walk away with something in return. Within an industry, when someone provides a product, labor, time, or service, they expectedly get something in return and even want something in return. Individuals in charitable organizations walk away knowing that there was not much to profit from their service other than the experience. However, the experience is something

commendable. Charitable involvements can be stepping stones for future opportunities that potential applications or employees are seeking.

Hurricane Katrina was an unfortunate natural occurrence. The media's presentation of it made people feel scared, captivated, and eager to help. Television and radio depictions of Katrina's impact on New Orleans shed a pitiful and misfortunate light over the city and its communities. This stimulated many individuals to view New Orleans as an opportunity to assist the city. After Katrina, the Lower Ninth Ward emerged as an area for charitable opportunities for outsiders. Consequently, these opportunities are nice resume boosters that are easy to get involved in. Community service experiences are highly regarded by some institutions and occupations. Using a charitable experience is not a terrible thing, but many outsiders who are eager to help lack cultural competency, towards what was going on in this city before the storm occurred. Individuals involved in charitable organizations providing restoration services to the Lower Ninth Ward community can come from all over, having different cultures and backgrounds, while also not having any knowledge of the history, culture, and environment of New Orleans. *How can the Lower Ninth be restored, if the individuals that assisting the community do not know what the area was like before Katrina?* Katrina washed homes, traditions, and even some people of the community away. Thus, the Lower Ninth is in a sensitive position since it is being helped by outsiders who could, intentionally or unintentional, alter this community because Katrina almost wiped it blank of its attributes.

The Lower Ninth Ward is offered free renewal services from different organizations and nonprofits. Since it is free, not much is expected in the quality and the duration of these services.

Individuals belonging to charitable organizations can dedicate as much of their time to a restoration project for the Lower Ninth community as they choose. However, since some volunteers are not trained beforehand in such work, the quality of their labor can vary and, in some circumstance, be very poor. This can result badly for a family waiting to one day live in a rebuilt home. The Lower Ninth Ward residents are dependent on the rebuilding these organizations are doing, and they have to trust that the aid they are receiving is of the utmost quality. The Lower Ninth Ward cannot financially support their own recovery because they were a disadvantaged community before Katrina. The whole community did not return after the storm, and many community members lost everything they owned or were nervous to return to the area.

Thus, the community is dependent and grateful for organizations helping out. However, it is a real concern for the community that volunteers can leave essential reestablishment projects whenever regardless if whether they are finished or not. There are no obligations, so if a project does not have an attached contract, volunteers are not required to stay and finish charitable services. Once individuals decide they are finished providing service, or even had enough, they can depart and use their service experience for attaining other opportunities or occupations.

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The compassion industry was a concept that grabbed my attention while trying to understand how nonprofits and residents within the Lower Ninth Ward view environmental justice issues after Katrina. The number of individuals excited to come and help the Lower Ninth Ward area baffled me, and I began to comprehend that it is okay for individuals to benefit from

helping others. What is imperative is that service efforts need to be tangible and complete to help this community. Different age groups coming from multiple states, dedicating various amounts and types of service, merely because they are compassionate individuals, is just a little too good to be true. Most people have a desire to gain something from the overall experience of helping; compassionate behavior or service looks favorable to potential jobs, fellowships, internships, or various opportunities. Therefore, the reasoning and purpose behind efforts and services given to the Lower Ninth do not fully matter. What matters is that individuals understand that their labor and involvement in the Lower Ninth Ward is critical, significant, and impactful. Thus, it must be taken seriously.

Chapter 6:

The Status of the Lower Ninth Community Eleven Years After Katrina

The community of the Lower Ninth Ward is much smaller than it was prior to Hurricane Katrina. The total population was reported in the U.S. Census of 2000 as 14,008, and in 2010, it was reported to be only 2,842 (Lower Ninth Ward Statistical Area, 2016). The community used to be comprised of many families with long histories within the area. There were over 3,000 family households reported in the area in 2000, and only 683 family households were reported to be in the Lower Ninth in the U.S. Census of 2010 (Lower Ninth Ward Statistical Area, 2016).

After Katrina, property values in the Lower Ninth became inevitably cheaper because of the damaged and vacant state of the area. Community members struggled to return to the Lower Ninth for a range of reasons, such as emotional stress, lost family members, and monetary troubles. The cheap prices for former homes of pre-Katrina resident were purchased by outsiders of the community. Gentrification is what many of the returning Lower Ninth residents believe is happening to their homes. Outsiders are unfamiliar with the community's culture and bringing in their own. Gentrification is the process of refining and renovating an area to correspond with middle-class "taste" (Hamnett, 1991).

There used to be concerned and agitated rumors flowing through the community towards plans to turn the Lower Ninth Ward into a "green space." This meant leaving the area vacant and clearing neighborhoods so the area could be natural. Gossip floated around the community about government officials regarding the Lower Ninth as a damaged and flood-prone area, which could

be gutted and transformed. It was surreal for the Lower Ninth community that their homes were considered being taken away.

From the perspective of an environmentalist, the "green space" plan sounds like an appealing solution to handle the vulnerable nature of this risk-prone area, because it could naturally drain flood water. However, the Lower Ninth community found the plans for their home alarming. The Lower Ninth Ward was already wiped out by Katrina and a plans to remove this area completely would rid it of all its history, traditions, and memories. These plans were never put into action, but the consideration of them upset and frightened the Lower Ninth community. *Why was it so easy to contemplate the removal of the Lower Ninth Ward*, when areas like the French Quarter, the Garden Districts, and Business Districts would have never been considered for these plans? The consideration of these plans added more negative feelings to preexisting tension towards the government. Frankly, there was not much the Lower Ninth could have done if these plans were put into action. The community was struggling to restore itself because of the social and environmental injustices that victimized it, making it susceptible to encumbering decisions.

The Lower Ninth Ward was not a priority like the French Quarter or the Business District, it was something the government would get to later. Therefore, all the Lower Ninth community could do was to keep trying and not give up on their rights as Americans. Eleven years have passed, Katrina exacerbated social and environmental justice issues and produces more. This community prior to Katrina did not have much and lost almost everything they did

have to the hurricane. *We are still here*— is a powerful and memorable statement from many Lower Ninth residents after Katrina.

The area was neglected before and after it was hit by Katrina. The Lower Ninth community recognized that they were going to have to care for themselves because no one was able to or really wanted to. Thus, there was only so much this community could do, because they lost so much. Volunteers and programs to rebuild are appealing solutions if those that knew the community prior to Katrina have the strongest say towards restoration. The Lower Ninth community should be in control and involved in defining their needs and designing appropriate ways to meet them.

Chapter 7:

Three Case Studies. Three Different Views.

This chapter is divided into three case studies that each provide different views of the environmental justice issues within the Lower Ninth community. The sources include informants connected to the Lower Ninth community, and an organization concentrated on helping restore the area. The various views of the Lower Ninth's condition, the influx of different organizations that aim to assist the area, and the existing injustices evident there, collectively mold different approaches to bring back the Lower Ninth.

Nat Turner

I met Nat Turner during the summer of 2016 and had a hard time believing that was his real name. Nat Turner shares his name with a historic figure who lived in the 1800sand led a rebellion consisting of slaves and freed blacks. The Turner I chatted with on a rainy day in July, was a known contact of Dr. Janet Grigsby.

He used to be a public school teacher in New York City, but exchanged that lifestyle to become an active member of the Lower Ninth community. Turner founded the organization, *Our School at Blair Grocery* (OSBG) in 2008, and it blended the concept of urban farming with a "food justice academy." OSBG is located in the Lower Ninth Ward, right across from Turner's home. It is an organization working to transform the Lower Ninth into a resilient and secured area. Turner's OSBG teaches the youth of the Lower Ninth community skills, that are not only applicable for having a sustainable lifestyle but are useful in the real world. Skills such as measuring and calculating agricultural supplies, and selling produce to New Orleans restaurants,

are beneficial comprehensive skills and business experience. Essentially, it is an opportunity to learn life skills in an interactive manner with the environment.

Before Katrina, Turner was a well-established teacher at the Beacon School and lived in New York City. However, once Katrina struck the city of New Orleans, Turner began traveling from New York to Louisiana with a bunch of students in a colorful school bus and brought them to the Lower Ninth community to volunteer. After he became attached to the community, Turner ended up leaving his job as an educator in New York City and moved to the Lower Ninth Ward. There, he was recognized as a community member--advancing from being an outsider to gaining a community's trust and membership. Turner did not want anything in return for his efforts in the Lower Ninth. He instead just genuinely wanted to help his new community. He left his career in New York for an extremely modest lifestyle in the Lower Ninth residential community.

I remember it being a hot and rainy afternoon when I sat down with Turner and listened to him share information about his organization and his personal experiences with the Lower Ninth with me. Turner was very honest about the strengths and weaknesses of his organizations, and he informed me that I may come across some negative accounts about his work. He believed the funding for OSBG, his income, and the checks promised to students (for their labor on the farm) were extremely low, because of the influence of negative assumptions towards his business. Later on, I searched for claims about Turner. I came across an article in *Aljazeera America* which informed me that the United States Department of Agriculture used to fund OSBG (Hayoun, 2015). The department and a few restaurants that brought crops from OSBG accused Turner of laundering funds since they were given in cash. Cash was hard to keep track

of and was how his students wanted to be paid (because most did not have bank accounts). Turner, of course, said the negative accusations of him are not true but impacted the success of his organization. He told me he had no intention of doing the things he had been accused of. He was focused on helping secure the Lower Ninth Ward's future. However, his organization struggled to fund their continuation because of barriers and lack of support. Turner believed there are many barriers individuals seem to put up to prevent his organization from advancing, despite OSBG being community-based and focused. Turner believed that individuals were out to subjugate the community, and he had unsure and critical views of Lower Ninth Ward's current state. He believes that there needs to be more support given to the community, and Turner's tough views about the community's progress depicted the Lower Ninth as almost paralyzed. Turner's depiction of the Lower Ninth today presents itself as a case study, which Turner believes injustices were served. To him, the area was severely neglected.

Turner also had opinions of the outsiders (volunteers) helping with the Lower Ninth's rehabilitation. He had apprehensive views that outsiders of this community had their own motives for helping. Turner spoke negatively of charitable organizations coming into the Lower Ninth, shared his irritation with their service, and believed their involvement corresponded to the "compassion industry." He viewed that organizations comprised of untrained outsiders coming to the community to volunteer were motivated more for their resumes than genuine altruism. Outsiders have the ability to move on from the pressing environmental and social issues existing in the Lower Ninth community and return to their own life. Nat Turner's stance of some of the charitable actives in the community was skeptical, especially towards the redevelopment of the Lower Ninth. Turner articulated his cynical views with uncensored and sharp language when he

described the condition and actions occurring in Lower Ninth today. He cursed and was not shy about how he addressed the efforts made by organizations and particular individuals. Specifically, individuals he felt were helping his community for personal gain, had selfish intentions, and labeled him as a bad man (despite his positive service to the community).

Naturally, speaking with Turner about his equally passionate and adverse views towards the forms of aid that the Lower Ninth receives triggered further discussion about the role, in which, white and black race relations in America play concerning the injustices that occur in communities like the Lower Ninth. The injustices occurring are both social and environmental, and Turner believes the race-based society Americans live in has invoked many of the problems he sees in his community. “Who are the individuals you see here, Nia? And who are those coming to help,” asked Turner. “I’m a colored gay man, and I can roll with this area more than these wealthy white students that are coming to help.” Thus, Turner made a significant point about the importance of having cultural understandings while doing charitable work. You cannot help what you do not understand, and if people want to help this community, they need to learn about this community.

Turner was a northerner that lived with his husband in a modest Lower Ninth shotgun home across the street from the OSBG farm. The goats on the OSBG are heard throughout the day from his porch. I wanted to address traits of Turner's lifestyle because he is accepted by this southern community despite his sexuality and former past. I overheard Turner make arrangements to grab dinner with one neighbor and borrow supplies from another. He was very connected to the community and had strong relationships with neighborhood kids because most

of them he knew when they were very young. “Street smarts or etiquette” allowed Turner to assimilate with the individuals of this area. Turner presented “both sides of a coin,” as 1) the director of an organization aiding the Lower Ninth, and as 2) a Lower Ninth resident trying to make a different.

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An interesting analogy shared by Turner while I chatted with him, was to think of New Orleans like a school lunch tray. Each food item on this hypothetical tray represents a different sector of New Orleans. On this tray, the listed foods are green beans, mashed potatoes, a piece of meatloaf, and a fruit cup. He indicated that the green beans represent *The Lower Ninth Ward*, the mashed potatoes are *The Business District*, while the meatloaf is the *French Quarter*, and the fruit cup is the *Garden District* area of New Orleans. The Garden District is a very rich area known to consist of many mansions. Turner’s depiction of the different parts of t New Orleans as food on a kid’s lunch tray represent that what a kid would be the least excited to eat would be the most unappealing sector to the government. Therefore, the green beans represented the Lower Ninth because the sector is overlooked and seen as unappetizing (or unappealing) compared to the rest of the city.

Turner also described the Lower Ninth as a combination of the ghetto and the country with emerging gentrification, because of social and environmental issues. His pessimistic, but realistic, outlook expresses that many of the organizations that have come to restore the area lack an understanding of the community’s culture. Many individuals who come to the area do not

even know the Lower Ninth Ward before Hurricane Katrina or what environmental justice this community was entitled to, but was deprived of.

Arthur Johnson

Through the application of the snowball method, I was pointed towards the direction of someone involved in *Lower Ninth Ward Center for Sustainable Engagement and Development* (CSED). I received Arthur Johnson's contact information and the organization's name, which I then regarded as an informative source for my thesis. Johnson agreed to chat with me one early morning at the center and he introduced himself as the chief executive officer of the CSED when we were face-to-face. Johnson shared that the CSED focused on coastal rehabilitation, "greening" the community, and on assuring food security. His organization's main concern was making sure the Lower Ninth community was knowledgeable about what was going on in their community and able to recognize the environmental injustices and changes occurring around them.

Johnson was a case study that presented a scientific and credible view of the Lower Ninth's history and its current state. Johnson did not articulate whether he was or was not fond of the number of non-local volunteers coming to rebuild the area. He was more determined about having the community gain awareness of environmental injustices that prevails in Lower Ninth. Johnson believed history can be used to foresee the possible future of this community. He upheld a perspective that was realistic and concentrated on accessible statistics and science to mold answers for the Lower Ninth's current state.

Johnson believes that the people in New Orleans--who live near the canals that channel from the Mississippi River or the levees--should be more conscious of environmental justice issues, especially after Hurricane Katrina. He credits our current generation for being more educated about environmental terms and working to understand how environmental justice is entwined with social justice. However, he acknowledges that there are not many young people in this community that are educated about the environment. Johnson declared that Hurricane Katrina struck the Lower Ninth Ward in two ways. One, it obviously destroyed a lot of the community (i.e. infrastructure, homes, and resources), and two, it caused people to become more aware of the flaws within the justice system (especially, when protection was not equally distributed). Johnson was conscious that Katrina triggered a lot of engagement in the Lower Ninth, which could be one positive result of the storm. The underserved Lower Ninth community was not advocated for much environmental justice prior to Hurricane Katrina; so, aid from organizations was a progressive step.

Robert Green

I was told to meet Mr. Robert Green Sr. when I visited the Lower Ninth Living Museum, a few days after I met Arthur Johnson. I learned that Green was a member of the museum board, and I reached out to him to see if he would talk to me. He agreed, and I soon discovered that Mr. Green was a ball of joy and optimism. The first thing that comes to mind when remembering him was his positive and cheerful nature. Mr. Green is my third case study and provides a different outlook on what is happening in the Lower Ninth. He appeared to be a well-known figure in the Lower Ninth community because everyone seemed to know him as we walked around the neighborhood. He was always pulled into a conversation with a community member. From what

I concluded, Turner and Johnson were familiar figures in the community and had strong ties with the Lower Ninth, but Mr. Green was a recognized and active individual. He knew almost everyone, their extended families, and their Lower Ninth story.

Walking around in his neighborhood near the levee, Mr. Green would point every second towards something and begin a tale or memory about it. Green was born in the Eighth Ward and moved to the Lower Ninth Ward when he was young. He shared with me what life in the Lower Ninth Ward was like when he was growing up. For example, everyone knew each other and walked to school together. It was the kind of environment where you could be disciplined by someone else's parents because everyone just knew each other and opened their doors to each other.

Mr. Green lived through Katrina and has tragic memories of his grand-daughter drowning in the flood waters, and his mother collapsing and dying while he and his family stood on the roof to escape the flooding. He informed me that she died from the heat because it was August in Louisiana when Katrina came, and it was an extremely hot time of year. For those like Green during Katrina, you were either trying not to drown or experienced dehydration and heat exhaustion. He spoke of his memories in an accepting manner, and despite these painful memories, he did not question returning to the Lower Ninth. It was his home, and despite his old home being destroyed by Katrina, he presently lives comfortably in a new home in his old neighborhood. He lives in one of Brad Pitts' *Make It Right* houses, and had a picture in his living room of him standing side-by-side with Pitt himself.

Thus, Mr. Robert Green presented a fondness towards many organizations that have come to the Lower Ninth to help restore. He expressed that he is overall just thankful for any aid outsiders could give his community, and does not really care about those that volunteer with hidden purposes or intentions; he is just thankful for their help. Having philanthropic or selfish intentions does not matter to Mr. Green because those that come are still making a positive impact on his community, which could not have funded itself. Green has lived in the Lower Ninth Ward for a long time and has seen the transformation it has undergone through his 42 years of living there. His first-hand account with Katrina has led him to become an active member involved in the Lower Ninth Living Museum, and a big supporter of the *Make It Right Foundation.* He, overall, just wants the community to become sustainable and he's accepting of any help offered.

Green lost so much because of the storm (i.e. his family, money, and home), and there were years following Katrina when those losses caused him tremendous anger, pain, and distrust in governmental organizations. He admitted to once blaming FEMA, blaming race relations, and feeling not cared about because of where he was from. During and after Katrina, people wanted things to be done, and they felt that because of who they were and where they were from, they were not getting the most progressive help. He eventually came to an understanding that he was one, of many, experiencing these hardships.

Turner, Johnson, and Green were unique individuals with interesting views of the Lower Ninth's journey towards recovery. They were great case studies because they represented an attitude-spectrum of the community. Turner represented negative views, while Johnson was a

neutral stance and Green even presented a positive outlook the Lower Ninth's current state. Each was aware of the aid being provided to the community from various organizations, but of the slow rate of recovery too. Despite interviewing each and learning their viewpoints of environmental injustice, I saw these three individuals as an opportunity to hear from people very connected to the Lower Ninth.

Chapter 8:

Conclusion – "Now What?"

The purpose of my thesis was to comprehend how organizations and residents in the Lower Ninth Ward view environmental justice issues after Hurricane Katrina. Environmental justice issues are social issues that are affecting the Lower Ninth. It has been over a decade since Hurricane Katrina, and the physical appearance of the Lower Ninth Ward is proof of a disparity existing in New Orleans. Other Wards or areas, such as the French Quarter or Garden District, help emphasize inequity when compared with the Lower Ninth. Race, infrastructure, and protection correlates with environmental racism and injustices and are the explanation for the Lower Ninth's delayed recovery. A range of organizations in the Lower Ninth is providing services to the community to help it be restored. However, these services are not speeding up the Lower Ninth's recovery because environmental justice issues need to be confronted before true progress can be made.

To summarize, this thesis encompasses all my trips to New Orleans and all the organizations I have encountered in the Lower Ninth Ward. Defining environmental justice and understanding its conceptual history presents the intersection of the Civil Rights Movement and the Environmental Justice Movement. The Lower Ninth is undergoing environmental injustice because of social (civil) and environmental concerns embedded in American structure and because of the geography of New Orleans. The blame for the delay of the Lower Ninth's comeback could be pointed at Katrina, the levees' design, the depleting wetlands, or the community itself. However, the blame points to all of these aspects, because they are playing a role in the Lower Ninth's current state. There is an array of organizations that provide services to

the Lower Ninth. Their attributes and aspirations can differ from each other; all the organizations mentioned in this thesis are trying to assist the Lower Ninth in different ways. The *compassion industry* is a useful concept for forming a consciousness of organizations or volunteers' intentions and motivation for helping. The Lower Ninth Ward is gradually being restored but needs a lot more to be done to fully recover. The three case studies presented views that were cynical, realistic, and optimistic towards the Lower Ninth's state and the service done by organizations.

It is hard to predict what is next for the Lower Ninth Ward community. If the community gains environmental justice, the result of this will be visible in the infrastructure of the community. FEMA marking would not exist on any home or former home in neighborhoods, and there would be fewer weed-filled lots and abandon homes making the community feel vacant. The community culture would be able to shine since it is no longer oppressed by injustice. If another storm were to happen, currently, the Lower Ninth would be destroyed to a state worse than Katrina left it. However, if the Lower Ninth is able to recover and become resilient, the community could withstand another natural disaster. Having organizations and community members become educated about environmental justice and civic rights could help the Lower Ninth not be susceptible to injustices. Therefore, the environmental injustice is within a “silent” community. If the Lower Ninth community chooses to not advocate or work for their rights, then environmental injustices will persist. However, this community, with the help from organizations, could collectively restore the Lower Ninth to a resilient state; if there was more consideration from the government. Funding and support could speed the recovery process for this community.

Appendix

Questions for Lower Ninth Ward Residents

1. Tell me about yourself. (i.e. age, where you are from, where your family is from…)
2. What do you love about New Orleans? What do you not like?
3. Why did you come back *[if not already answered]*?
4. How do you feel about the Lower Ninth (your home)? Do you see a change or a progress of change being made in the area? If so, what is your honest opinion that progress of restoration of the Lower Ninth?
5. What do you want for the Lower Ninth, meaning how would you like the Lower Ninth to look once all the restoration is completed?
6. Honestly, what was worse, the storm itself or the post-storm period?
7. How do you feel about the organizations that have come to the Lower Ninth Ward to help restore?
8. What have nonprofits done in the Lower Ninth that you are thankful for?
9. Are there particular nonprofits that you prefer or believe are making the biggest change? (i.e. Grassroots, celebrity-run organizations, national organizations, or faith-based)
10. Do you feel the people that come to help truly care or understand what it feels like to be a Lower Ninth resident? Please explain.
11. How do you feel when an outsider comes and says "I'm here to help?" What is your first thought?
12. How do you feel about the long-term volunteers who come to rebuild your home and who often get funded to work in the area?
13. Do you sense sympathy or empathy from outsiders that have come to New Orleans after the storm? Especially those that have come to help? Do you feel that the people that come here display compassion?
14. What does the typical volunteer look like?
15. Are there things New Orleanians could do better than outsiders in the process of restoring?
16. You explained why you came back, but if another storm occurred would you return again?
17. Have you heard of environmental justice? *(If not, I will read the EPA definition)* After hearing the definition, do you feel Katrina was correlated to environmental injustice? Do you believe race and class were factors of the negative impacts of the storm? Why? Or why not?
18. The damage in the French Quarter was repaired very quickly, in comparison to areas like the Lower Ninth Ward. What are your thoughts about this?
19. Do you think more enforcements of environmental laws, regulations, and policies were made after Katrina? Please explain.
20. What are your opinions of FEMA? *[Define FEMA's role and mission if needed.]*
21. *[If more information is needed from the individual.]* What is your story? Or is there anything else you would like to share with us that will help us understand your experience as a resident?

Questions for Individuals from Organizations based in the Lower Ninth Ward

1. Where are you from? *[if not from L9]* What brought you to New Orleans (The Lower Ninth Ward)?
2. What is your organization? What is the mission/ goal of the nonprofit you are a part of? Do you think or do you see your nonprofit making a difference? Please explain.
3. What is your role in the organization?
4. [*if a volunteer]* What made you want to volunteer? When did you begin volunteering? How long have you been volunteering in New Orleans?
5. How would you define what being a volunteer means? [*please explain]*
6. How did you hear about Hurricane Katrina?
7. How would you describe Katrina? How do you think the residents describe Katrina? *[if have trouble with this, ask: What 3 words first come to mind to describe Katrina? Please explain. Use the 3 words technique below as needed.]*
8. *[if not a resident]* How much have you interacted with the residents of the Lower Ninth Ward?
9. How would you describe the Lower Ninth spirit? What is life in the Lower Ninth like? *[Use the 3 words technique if needed.]*
10. In what ways is the Lower Ninth an important part of New Orleans?
11. What is your impression of what the Lower Ninth Ward was like before the storm? How would you describe it?
12. Do you think it is in a better or worse state than it was before the storm hit? Please explain. Do you think the Lower Ninth could be restored to a state better than it once was even before the storm? Please explain.
13. What is left to be done in the Lower Ninth (in the context of restoration)?
14. What are the aspects of your nonprofit that you admire? What are things you would like to do or change about your nonprofit?
15. Do you believe you gain anything from helping? If so, what are you personally gaining from your work? What is your organization gaining from its work?
16. What do you think about the other nonprofits that have all poured into New Orleans after the storm?
17. Have you heard the concept, "Compassion Industry?" *[If not, I will read the definition]* What are your opinions of this definition?
18. Were you trained before volunteering *[or before starting your job]*? If so, how?
19. Some disaster recovery programs have been criticized because their volunteers get very little training. Have you seen this in your work? Explain. How do you feel about the inexperienced volunteer building homes for people?
20. What are you planning to do after you are done *[with this job]* volunteering?
21. How many people in your organization are from the area?

22. Non-profits have tended to have more non-locals than local people working in them. Have you seen this within your own organization? What is your opinion on this, if so?
23. The damage in the French Quarter was repaired very quickly, in comparison to areas like the Lower Ninth Ward. What are your thoughts about this?
24. What do you think brings a lot of tourists to this part of New Orleans?
25. Do you feel there is more to be done than rebuilding projects to help the Lower Ninth recover? If so, what?
26. For you personally, do you see your organization's efforts as a short term solution or long term? Please explain.
27. Some people criticize volunteers because they have the ability to leave once they are done volunteering, while locals cannot leave as easily. That is, how do you feel about being able to go home once they're done volunteering, while people from the Lower Ninth must stay regardless if their community is restored or not?
28. Do you think there will be another storm? If so, how do you feel about the rebuilding and restoring you are currently working on that could be destroyed again if another storm were to occur? Please explain your opinion of the efforts performed in the Lower Ninth and the progress made these past 11 years.
29. Do you believe that sometimes good intentions could actually cause harm? Explain your answer.
30. Have you heard of the concept "environmental justice"? If so, what is your understanding of it? *[If not I will read the EPA definition.]* Do you see a correlation between Katrina and environmental injustice? Do you think there is an environmental justice issue here?
31. Do you think more enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies was made after Katrina? Please explain.
32. What are your opinions of FEMA? *[Define FEMA's role and mission if needed.]*

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